



## Movies from behind the Barricades

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STEPHEN FARBER

## Movies from Behind the Barricades

The fickleness of commercial decision-makers in Hollywood has never been more strikingly in evidence, and it must discourage anyone who is concerned about the future of the American film. Just a year ago there was reason to be hopeful. Hollywood had discovered the youth audience. The success of *Midnight Cowboy*, *Easy Rider*, *Alice's Restaurant* had convinced the executives that escapism was out of fashion, and, anxious to tap the gigantic new market, they gave unprecedented freedom to film-makers who wanted to deal with the problems that touched youth and inflamed them. Almost no movies with college settings had been made during the sixties; even *The Graduate*, the most successful youth movie of the decade, and set partly in Berkeley, concentrated on sex and romance but curiously avoided any details that would suggest what it was like to be in college two years after FSM. But all at once the men who were trying to predict the future of the business decided that young people wanted to see movies about their own experiences—and what more logical subject for exploitation than campus rebellion and student protest? By late 1969, within a few months of the phenomenal success of *Easy Rider*, several movies about college and revolution were in preparation—*The Strawberry Statement* (based to some extent on James Simon Kunen's book about the Columbia disturbances but relocated in Hayakawa country), *Getting Straight*, *The Magic Garden of Stanley Sweetheart*, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *The Revolutionary*, *Up in the Cellar* (a quickie from American International). MGM had Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* ready for release, and they were counting on the film to save their dying studio. Soon Stanley Kramer, always quick to pick up on a commercial social problem, proposed *RPM* to explore the issue of student re-

bellion from the other side of the generation gap, with Anthony Quinn scheduled to play Stanley Kramer, the aging, discarded liberal. The campus riot became the stock scene of 1970 films.

Now all these movies are in release. Only *Getting Straight* is a commercial success, and that appears to be more because of Elliott Gould's presence than because of the subject matter. The other movies are not just failures, they are commercial disasters. What went wrong? The question deserves some intensive analysis, because as a result of the failure of these movies, and the huge simultaneous success of *Airport*, the direction of American movie-making looks as if it is about to be reversed. Political films are being cancelled. "The day of the student film-maker and the youth movie is over," I heard an agent say recently. ("It's only *lasted* about a day," I wanted to protest, but to whom?) Studio executives, helplessly trying to understand the audience, and totally bewildered by the box-office receipts, are looking for safe entertainment, for "uplifting" pictures. On a television forum in Los Angeles recently, the head of production at MGM said he thought the audience was tired of "downers." Unfortunately, with the blooming of the Nixon Era, he may be right.

The critics probably did not foresee all of this when they blasted the opportunism of the campus pictures earlier in the year. Certainly few American movies have aroused more critical indignation than *Getting Straight* and *The Strawberry Statement*. Timing worked against the films. Both were released shortly after the student deaths at Kent State and Jackson; people had been shaken by a recognition of the gravity of student-police conflict on campus, and they were not about to tolerate any cynical Holly-

wood profiteers hawking slick, fashionable slogans of dissent and rebellion in the marketplace. *Newsweek* wrote: "While college students are being shot to death and colleges are fighting for their own lives in the real world, the unprincipled fools of the movie business rush in with *Getting Straight*, a violent varsity comedy in which light-hearted kids tear up a university and blow kisses to each other across the embattled campus." When these movies were planned, it was modish to attack the university as an instrument of the military-industrial complex; but by the time they were released, the university once again seemed a possible haven of reason and sanity in an increasingly repressive society.

Topical movies are clearly a dangerous enterprise, unless they can be produced and released much more quickly than the American studio system presently allows. But there are other reasons why these films have failed to attract the young audience. For one thing, they are probably *too* close to the experience of young people. Especially to young people committed to radical university reform or full-scale social revolution, the very *idea* of a Hollywood movie on the subject is bound to be offensive. And in an even more basic sense, young people have an easier time recognizing false touches in a movie drawn from a world that is familiar to them than they would in a movie about male prostitution in New York or turn-of-the-century Western bandits in South America. These student protest movies are dealing with material in which a large segment of the audience considers itself expert. (One veteran of the Columbia disturbance who was angry at *The Strawberry Statement* told me, "You don't wear your glasses during a bust.")

But these movies are not so much inaccurate as incomplete. Cultural historians in the future, who look to American films for some reflection of larger social attitudes, will find a striking vacuum in the movies of the sixties. No major American movie acknowledges what was taking place from about 1964 to 1968, the period of growing social involvement among the young

and the awakening of national consciousness to the moral implications of the war in Vietnam, racism in American society, pollution of the environment, corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency within all major institutions in America—from the Pentagon to the university itself. Movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant* captured something of the spirit of young people in more indirect and archetypal terms; only *Medium Cool* tried to deal with the real social disturbances of those years within the frame of the fiction film. In the early sixties some talented American movie-makers had turned out a group of interesting political melodramas—*Advise and Consent*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Fail Safe*, *Seven Days in May*, *The Best Man*—dealing mainly with Cold War tensions and the threat of the Bomb. But throughout the last half of the sixties, our movies determinedly avoided political themes.

Now suddenly, in these student protest movies, all those years in which the conscience of a generation was formed, all those agonized internal struggles and fiery political debates are *taken for granted*; what propels the films of 1970 is the assumption of a youth culture socially and politically alert and dissatisfied, but, in the movies at least, we have no record at all of how young people arrived at this point of concern. And the new movies themselves do not dramatize—sometimes do not even *mention*—the issues that have enraged students and brought them to the point of throwing rocks at cops and at buildings. So there is an eerie sense of dislocation we feel in watching them. Both Richard Rush's *Getting Straight* and Robert Mulligan's *The Pursuit of Happiness* take as their heroes young men who, according to expository dialogue in the films, have already spent several years in active forms of social protest—Selma, anti-war marches, the McCarthy campaign, Chicago 1968—and have grown frustrated and disillusioned with the dream of social involvement. Those political activities of the mid-sixties have never been presented on screen; while we are still waiting to see an

American movie hero who comes to believe in the urgency of social involvement—a SNCC worker, a campus leader, a draft resister—we are already asked to understand characters who are *disillusioned* with the new politics, who *reject* any kind of peaceful political activism, self-consciously withdrawing from society or turning to violence as a last expression of outrage and despair. This bitterness is an accurate enough reflection of the mood of many American youth in 1970, but our movies haven't earned the right to take such a despairing, nihilist stance; their pose of radicalism seems much too glibly asserted.

It may be unfair to score the new movies because of the failures of other movie-makers; but we are so starved for challenging movies about political tensions that we cannot help resenting the intellectual emptiness of the "revolution" films. Even the best of them, *The Strawberry Statement*, is a bad joke if you try to take it as a serious, realistic movie about the issues that pertain to campus rebellion. The level of political thought in the movie can be found in the chants that the protagonist hears (or imagines he hears) at strike rallies: "Strike because you hate cops . . . Strike because you hate war . . . Strike because there is poverty . . . Strike because there's no poetry in your lectures . . . Strike because classes are a drag . . ." I think these slogans are deliberately exaggerated to suggest the nature of a boy's incipient political awareness; they are not meant as a documentary record of the quality of debate on the campuses. But there is no more sophisticated dialogue anywhere in the film. The strike is already on when *The Strawberry Statement* begins, and although we are told that it has something to do with the university taking possession of a playground used by black children and turning it into an ROTC center (based loosely on the situation at Columbia), the issues are never seriously explored or even explained. The meager details provided by the film are meant to clue in the knowing members of the audience; presumably we're all on the right side of the barricades.

The state of siege is also the *donnée* in *RPM*. ("They're occupying the administration building again," someone tells the board of trustees at the very beginning of the film, and their blasé acceptance of the fact is unintentionally amusing.) We have no clear idea why the students are protesting—we can catch a couple of references to Inner City scholarships and university business holdings in South Africa—but the movie-makers don't feel this is a crucial point to establish; they assume we're all hip enough to read the signals and fill in the background for ourselves. The plot of *RPM* turns on three student demands which are supposed to be unreasonable: the students want control over the curriculum, and even over the hiring and firing of faculty and the granting of degrees. To people who don't know anything about the debates that have been taking place on college campuses for most of a decade, these demands may indeed sound ludicrous—proof of the students' childishness and unwillingness to compromise. The young people are portrayed throughout as insensitive, intolerant extremists, and this is certainly one possible interpretation; but I think a movie that comes to this conclusion at least has an obligation to explain *why* the students have grown impatient with the conventional liberal representatives of the university. Those student demands might not seem so presumptuous if the movie allowed us to hear some intelligent student-faculty debates about the role of the university in a troubled world—debates which any student radical has taken part in. At least *Getting Straight* gives a few indications of where orthodox liberal education has lost touch with young people's concerns. *RPM* offers no glimpses of education in progress, no suggestion of the kind of curriculum student radicals would like to see, no fair representation of their ideal of a free, open university; so its anti-student bias seems cheap, insular, irresponsible.

American movies have, of course, never been strong on ideas. But in these films *about* student politics, this characteristic deficiency is particularly damaging. The hero of *RPM* is supposed

to be a brilliant liberal sociologist; but although he drops a few of the right names in conversation, he never articulates any of his own philosophy of nonviolence or his ideas about the function of the university and the inequities in the society, so we have to take his credentials entirely on faith. One of these new movies, Paul Williams's *The Revolutionary*, even tries to define the maturation of a contemporary revolutionary without identifying the social setting in which his ideas develop ("somewhere in the free world," an opening title coyly informs us) or any of the specific social and political injustices he wants to fight. The film tries to build an abstract, generalized portrait that comes across only hollow and vague; the idea of doing a movie about radicalism shorn of a concrete social context for radical acts seems almost perversely evasive.

I believe the absence of genuine political thought in these movies, the failure to dramatize the full nature of involvement and protest, may have alienated many of the young people toward whom these films are ostensibly geared. And yet by ignoring these films, the young are missing some imaginative film-making, some interesting, challenging characterizations, and perhaps most simply, some crude, lively entertainment. I have emphasized the political and intellectual emptiness of these movies because I think that reveals something interesting—and depressing—about mass culture in America, but I do not mean to suggest that the movies are artistically invalidated merely by their political simplifications. In fact, nothing less than the provocative and important question of the relationship of politics to art is raised by this new group of films.

The critics, perhaps anxious to woo the young with a sign of solidarity, have simplified the issue by attacking the films in moral terms. Dotson Rader defined the high moral tone of this criticism in his review of *The Strawberry Statement* for the Sunday *New York Times*. Without bothering to analyze what the film was attempting, he blasted it as "a cheap attempt at the commercial co-option and exploitation of

the anguish of a generation," but at least he identified himself as "having been a part of the Columbia Liberation of 1968," so I can understand his outrage, even though I find it largely irrelevant to any reasonable evaluation of the film *as film*. Other critics who did not take part in the Columbia Liberation may have less excuse for denouncing the film as a betrayal of the radical cause. Their objections to the new films, like those of Rader, often sound surprisingly naive: the movies are contemptible because they are not "real" and because they are not "sincere"—and because the studios releasing the films hope to make money from them. But "sincerity"—which may be an admirable quality in a friend or relative—has always been a pretty unreliable criterion for appraising a work of art. Part of the nature of art is to be playful, irresponsible, irreverent, which is not to say that it cannot treat serious themes; but art always serves itself first, the revolution second. *The Strawberry Statement* may have a radical statement to make, but it also exists *for its own sake*: Stuart Hagmann, the director, takes pleasure in *how* he makes his statement, in the beauty of his images, in an inventive structuring of scenes that can suggest an interior point of view; in dramatic confrontation and surprise. Perhaps that concern with technique is a form of self-indulgence, of bourgeois decadence, but no one, not even Godard, has yet explained how art—as opposed to journalism or propaganda—can survive without it.

The difficulty of sorting out aesthetic from ideological, political, and moral responses is most acute in *Getting Straight*, a film which exploits serious issues (the enervation of university bureaucracy, student and police violence) and uses familiar contemporary figures toward whom an audience has very strong, sometimes ambivalent feelings—the black militant, the zonked-out hippie, the reactionary college president, the WASP-coed-turned-radical—to create a galley of eccentrics in a wacky screwball farce. "Ideas and characters are seldom protected from gags, for ideas and characters are expendable and gags aren't." Vincent Canby

wrote of the campus movies. But although Canby's terms are loaded, I'm not sure these are the wrong priorities. The jokes in *Getting Straight* are indeed more important than the political message; so it follows that there can be jokes even on the heroes of the counter-culture—on the hippie who turns super-patriot when confronted with his draft board, on the sheltered liberal girls who are sexually stimulated by rioting, on the humorless, intense students who want to hear about Nat Turner's hemorrhoids in black history class. Are these jokes signs of corruption, Hollywood expediency, lack of true commitment, as Vincent Canby seems to suggest, or are they signs of a genuinely anarchic satire, a refreshing willingness to offend even the young audience toward whom the film is supposedly directed? Probably there is something of both courage and calculation in *Getting Straight's* wild, erratic, indiscriminately irreverent comedy.

The audience takes *Getting Straight* as a fanciful cartoon. I think they recognize the exaggerations and distortions and enjoy them; they respond to the colorful, amusing caricatures, and to the fantasy of defiance and revolt against the tired, repressive academic tradition. No one who has ever suffered through a pedantic lecture or seminar could possibly resist the outrageous climactic scene of Harry's MA oral exam, in which—goaded by a fanatical professor trying to push his own theory about Fitzgerald's homosexuality—Harry literally freaks out and explodes the polite complacency of his questioners with a barrage of obscenities. Liberal critics have been too solemn about the movie; like crusaders for decency during the thirties, they imagine a simple relationship between art and life—people imitate whatever they see on the screen. Kids do cheer the moment when Harry picks up a rock and heaves it at a university window in *Getting Straight's* final scene, but that doesn't mean they are going to go out and bomb their classrooms, any more than the blacks who cheer the murder of the white policeman at the end of *The Liberation of L. B. Jones* are likely to go out and start shooting

at passing cops. These are only movies, after all, and part of their appeal is that they allow audiences to toy with some socially forbidden fantasies within the safety of the darkened theater, where no one can be held responsible for his dreams.

The main trouble with *Getting Straight* is a formal problem; it keeps changing tone—at one moment content to be an up-to-date screwball comedy with a campus setting, at the next straining after Significance. The unreality is set by the outrageously stylized conversations shouted across the quad, by Harry's crazy, broken-down jalopy, which goes through more special-effects contortions than one of those cars invented for James Bond, by the ghoulish free drink of hot water, crushed crackers, and catsup that he prepares for himself. In the slickly fashioned scenes in which Harry debates his girlfriend Jan and her square doctor friend, the university PR man, or the radical activists, we aren't really interested in the content of the debates, we're interested in Harry's flamboyant style and the witty, theatrical repartee. The ideas are subordinated to the effect. And that's perfectly acceptable as long as the film remains comic and fantastic. When it turns serious, it turns sour. In Harry's pompous exchange with the president about the validity of student demands, or in the grossly sentimental scene when he explains how he turned a student on to *Don Quixote*, the crudely oversimplified, pandering "message" cinema is much more offensive than any of the jokes. The first riot sequence, complete with tear gas, police clubbing students and students kicking back, is one of the cheapest pieces of audience exploitation I have ever seen: aesthetically revolting because it is so completely gratuitous. It has nothing to do with the comic character study the film has been sketching; in fact, it goes on for five minutes before Harry, who has been our focus throughout the film, even makes an appearance. In this somber scene the film is crassly titillating its audience, playing with serious issues, and it seems ugly. (On these grounds the film can be contrasted with Ted

Flicker's *Up in the Cellar*, a flip satire on university bureaucracy and repression that never makes the mistake of turning solemn. When Flicker wants to make a strong comment on the direction of American society, he does it *within* the comic frame he has established—as in one brilliant single-shot scene in which the hero and his girlfriend discuss their romance, while in the background a group of agitators are marched off by the police, apparently to a concentration camp. Flicker knows how to keep things in perspective, and his film is all the more mordant as a result.)

Perhaps the reason *Getting Straight* is such a mess is that the writer, Robert Kaufman, has confused two different stories from two different historical periods. The satire on academic insularity and bureaucracy has a genial, light-hearted flavor that places it before the period of extreme student militancy. Similarly, the central theme of a fellow trying to get his teaching certificate, constantly frustrated by the pettiness of the university administrators, simultaneously battling with his girlfriend over her suburban middle-class fantasies, has been reworked in literature several times since the fifties (Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* is probably the archetype). But this slightly nostalgic story is told against a background of student radicalism and violence of the late sixties; the issues and characters don't really belong together. Kaufman and Rush, who are in their thirties, understand Harry Bailey well enough, but they have set him in an environment they seem to know only from second-hand reports.

The major significance and interest of the movie is its success in discovering a protagonist who is at once genuinely contemporary and representative, and absolutely original. Kaufman and Rush focus on an unlikely figure—the pushy Jewish intellectual—and turn him into a new-style hero for comic melodrama. It is a classic star turn, in which all of the qualities that make Elliott Gould so distinctive as a movie personality—his rudeness, his boorishness, his self-satisfaction, his quick, alert, aggressive mind—are highlighted and glamorized, so that his por-

trait of Harry takes on an almost-mythical structure. The characterization is conceived in rather grand romantic terms, but it is closely observed too. A former radical, Harry is now contemptuous of the pettiness and naivete of radical demands, committed to the achievement of a limited private goal—the attainment of a teaching certificate—and quite ruthless in his determination to satisfy himself even at the expense of the movement. His cynicism is comprehensive—he is equally skeptical of both the students and administrators. The scenes between him and his girlfriend are especially well-drawn; Philip Roth would understand the mixture of passion and hostility in the relationship of this rough, unwashed Jew to the beautiful, complacent, unattainable WASP goddess, Candice Bergen. The character has roots in recognizable experience; as with the best movie characters, we can imagine a past for him, a life that stretches beyond his screen life. Unfortunately, Rush and Kaufman have had trouble imagining his future. They end the film too early—as Harry and Jan begin to make love on a stairway, while the riot goes on around them. But this facile fantasy conclusion leaves too much unsettled; we want to know where Harry will turn now, how he will use his energy and his intelligence once he has recognized the impossibility of creating a meaningful life within conventional boundaries. In other words, Rush and Kaufman have enough talent to create a valid, exciting, eccentric modern hero, but they have not tested themselves—or Harry—as searchingly as they might have; they lack the vision to foresee how this kind of man will make his way in the world.

A number of these films demonstrate the same ability to create interesting, offbeat characters, and the same inability to place those characters in the challenging dramatic situations that they deserve. Even Kramer's *RPM* has a potentially fascinating hero, a character through whom Kramer has tried to express some of his own doubts and angers and frustrations. F. W. J. Perez is in a classic liberal dilemma—a man who spent his life fighting repression suddenly finds

himself repudiated by the radical young, who are unable to distinguish him from the most reactionary trustee. Anthony Quinn sensitively captures his humiliation at the contemptuous way the radicals treat him, his revulsion from violence and ultimate self-revulsion when he is forced to ally himself with the police; the material is here for a complex moral study. But Erich Segal's script, which delights in glib one-liners, utterly fails to develop or illuminate the theme. Without any incisive confrontation of the liberal and radical sensibility, without any effective visual or dramatic expression of the hero's inner life, all that we *can* respond to is the idea.

In *The Revolutionary* Jon Voight is given a little more to work with, and he brings all of his craft and conviction as an actor to the sketchy, difficult role of "A," the young revolutionary-in-the-making. He fashions an expert, delicate portrait of the awkward, intense student intellectual, in its homely way probably much closer to reality than the gargoyle animated by Elliott Gould in *Getting Straight*. Voight is particularly good at capturing the would-be revolutionary's fussiness and solemnity. He conceives the character in comic terms, but the comedy grows out of affection; and although the movie ignores most of the dramatic possibilities of its subject, the writing and performance of the central role help to give a little texture and humanity to a curiously pale treatise.

The role written (by Sidney Carroll) for Michael Sarrazin in *The Pursuit of Happiness* is even more intriguing; this is one of the first films that seriously tries to examine the background and unspoken motivations of today's rootless, disaffected young. Like other youth films, *The Pursuit of Happiness* emphasizes the repressiveness and dishonesty of respectable society—the bigotry of William's upper class family, the duplicity of his uncle, a successful lawyer, the hypocrisy of the courts, the brutality of our prisons. But this is no simple celebration of youth against the Establishment. William, our sensitive, alienated hero, a weary veteran

of the antiwar movement, is clearly limited and inadequate in his own way. The film establishes this immediately by showing his obsession with toy boats, and then goes on to dramatize his helplessness and irresponsibility through a variety of adventures. Again and again, when in a bind, he turns back to his family and relies on their money and professional expertise to extricate him. At the very end William uses his grandmother's money to buy his way out of the country, but he bungles even that. He hopes to go to Canada, but the shifty pilot takes all his money and then tells him he is flying to Mexico on this round. It is too late to back down, and long past the point of caring where he goes or what he does, William accepts the ride; as far as we can tell, his life is over. Trying to justify his lack of commitment, he says the country is having a "nervous breakdown," and although what the film shows us of the American system of justice would bear out his charge of ineradicable corruption, we feel William is only another victim of the society, hardly a victor over its hypocrisies. The film traces his carelessness, his lazy disillusionment, his casual disregard for authority to his easy, spoiled childhood; by asking us to see the relationship between the dull, comfortable upbringing of today's university rebels and the passive, tired style of much of their protest, *The Pursuit of Happiness* provocatively undercuts sentimentalization of the young—without going to the other extreme and trying to whitewash the decadent institutions of American society. This characterization gives the film an unusual point of view, but most everything else about it is undistinguished or simply false: Most of the other characterizations and performances are on a caricature level, and there is a good deal of shoddy contrivance in the plot; the result is that a very believable three-dimensional character is placed in a series of extremely unbelievable situations.

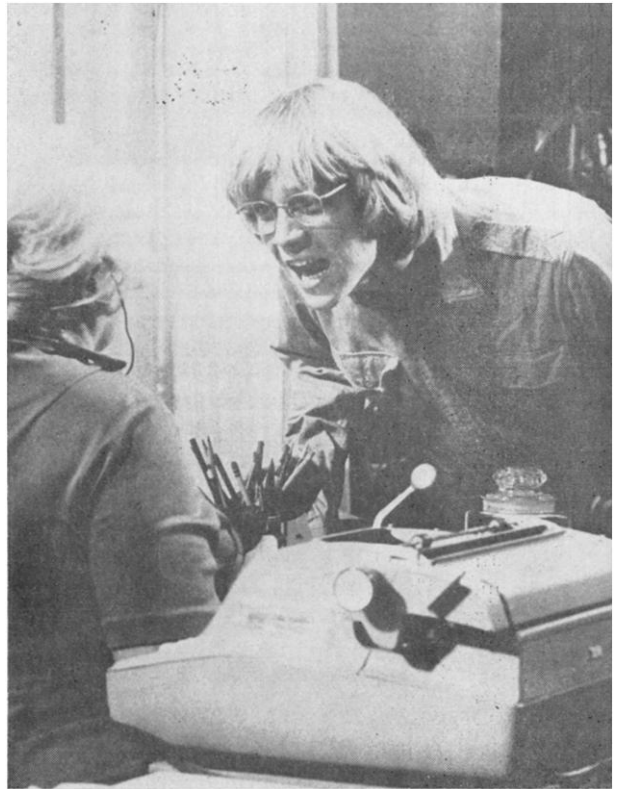
One of the chief difficulties with these socially conscious youth movies is deciding whom they are designed for. Are they propaganda films made to convert older people to the stu-



## BEHIND THE BARRICADES

dent cause? Are they new mass-audience entertainments simply to exploit the fantasies and fears of the young audience? Or can they be called works of art, created to satisfy the filmmakers themselves? All of these movies have either crassly or confusedly hedged on their intentions, and perhaps that is why they seem to be fully satisfying to no one. *The Strawberry Statement* is the most cogent and unified of all of them, but even it is not entirely clear in its aims. The writer, Israel Horovitz, and the director, Stuart Hagmann, seem to share their critics' insistence on social relevance as the major criterion in evaluating art; they want their movie to be a respectable radical-liberal document as well as a work of cinematic art. But the two aims may be irreconcilable. Hagmann has already made two significant cuts in the film—a comic fellatio scene that wittily mocked some of the young people's fantasies about violence, and a flashback montage at the very end—probably in the mistaken belief that those scenes compromised the seriousness of the political message. Hagmann and Horovitz have both said that they believe the film's main importance lies in what it tells middle America about student dissent: "We've got a very small ambition: to show those who still need showing that every protesting student is not insane . . ." Fortunately, the film is not that easily summarized and dismissed. In spite of its confusions of intention, its political and intellectual inadequacies, *The Strawberry Statement* is one of the finest movies about young people ever made in America, an extraordinary lyric of childhood's end and the agonized awakening of a radical sensibility.

*The Strawberry Statement* has angered some people because, like *Getting Straight*, it has an impudent, skeptical sense of humor about young people and their movement. Simon joins the strike primarily because he is interested in a girl he meets there. Once inside the occupied administration building, he seems more anxious to use the president's bathroom and to watch *Mutiny on the Bounty* on television than to take part in the radicals' debate about slanted news



THE STRAWBERRY STATEMENT

coverage and war research on campus; he even lies about how he received a bloody nose because he wants to impress the hard-core activists with firsthand evidence of police brutality. Does the film's psychological astuteness really demean the radical cause? Only the most self-righteous of young people would deny that part of their reason for joining the movement is the simple thrill of rebellion and the promise of fraternal solidarity—and maybe a few even consider the possibility of sex behind the barricades. But in any case, Simon's initial apathy is what sets the conversion story in motion. *The Strawberry Statement* is told from the perspective of a boy who *isn't* involved, who is confused in his responses to radical rhetoric, who plays at revolution and sneaks into a student strike as if he were embarking on a forbidden adventure in a new kind of wonderland.

Stuart Hagmann's visual style has been generally derided as a mélange of TV commercial

effects, but nonetheless it seems to me remarkably appropriate to capturing the quality of Simon's imagination. For Simon conceives his life in romantic terms, with extravagant flourishes borrowed from "lyrical" TV commercials and other movies. We are seeing the world through Simon's eyes (a simple fact that has somehow eluded almost all of the critics), and he tries to hold life off, see it with aesthetic distance. Reared on the media, he is uncomfortable without his radio or his Super 8 movie camera in his hand. One of the first times he takes note of the movement is when he comes upon a mime troupe enacting the beating of a student—revolution seen as dramatic performance. The original version of the film emphasized the secondhand nature of Simon's perceptions even more strongly: in the fellatio scene, when the girl in the xerox room took off her sweater to initiate Simon after his beating, Hagmann provided flash cuts of her breasts that were very obviously meant as a parody of the seduction scene in *The Graduate*. (Simon even asked the girl, as he gaped at her, "Did you see *The Graduate*?" )

Simon's perspective on life is enchanted by movie and TV memories, the flair and beauty of art; but that enchantment is a kind of protective blindness too. (It is no accident that Simon becomes aroused to a sense of social injustice for the first time when a group of blacks accost him in the park and, for no clear reason, smash his movie camera.) Hagmann deliberately calls attention to his visual style, for he means to comment on it: one of the film's most important themes is the magical power and the irresponsibility of art, and the distortions that arise when life begins to imitate art.

Like this scene in the park, most of the film works on a metaphorical, wittily allusive level, not a literal one. Hagmann uses recurring symbolic images—the crew teams rowing in harmony through the beautiful clear water, oblivious to the blighted urban landscape just out of eyeshot—as a kind of poetic refrain. And in the second half of the film he makes some startling experiments in blurring fantasy and

reality that have gone virtually unnoticed by the people outraged over the film's commercial gloss. *The Strawberry Statement* takes an important step toward refining cinematic language. Simon's adventures in and out of the administration building, back at crew practice, swinging around the city with his girl, are a free-form fantasy trip, a combination of memory and projection, imagination and reality that is not exactly comparable to anything I have seen in films before.

Most of these scenes are probably part of an imagined drama, not a real one. They are all shot through with a crazy, uninhibited kind of whimsical poetry. Transitions are illogical, unpredictable jumps in time and place disorient us. There are witty, outrageous, absurdist fantasies—the sequence in which Simon is reverently whispered over, introduced to a black militant, and carefully photographed when he comes in boasting that he was attacked by pigs, or the abrupt conversion of Simon's enemy George, the All-American Jock, into a committed revolutionary. Other, more realistic scenes are shaded with subtle, unsettling surrealistic touches—an old man in a café where Simon is daydreaming sits staring at the miniature stuffed animals spread out on the table before him; a Negro woman holding an umbrella on a sunny day rocks back and forth with laughter as students are dragged away from a demonstration; Linda leaves Simon, saying, "I have to get the bus," and a moment later, in the background, we see her rising in a glass elevator. In his imagination Simon can experiment with revolutionary activity, curiously, timidly, roguishly; he and the other students torment the police on a playground, all very genially, and when they are hauled off to jail, Simon tries to see what it would feel like to litter from the back of the paddy wagon. And during all of this, while the strike and the occupation continue, Simon even imagines he has time to live out a full-length romantic melodrama: Linda rejects him for another activist (what he calls an "extrarevolutionary relationship"), he mopes around for a while, and she

finally returns to him (in a scene that I think contains a deliberate parody of the reunion of Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney in *Two for the Road*). The love scenes, though tender and charming, are not presented quite straight; they seem to be placed in quotation marks. They are meant to be seen as a slightly over-ripe stylistic convention, capsulizing a way of life that is already corrupt.

What is most poignant is the sense of compression and unreality in these scenes—as if an entire boyhood romance were being squeezed into a few days, an entire dream of growing up absurd accelerated, apprehended only in fragments that seem to shatter before our eyes. This lyrical fantasy, in which “Up against the wall!” is no more than a challenge to masculine bravado—a kaleidoscope of images taken from romantic art and charged with all the passion and imagination that a boy can bring to ordinary experience—is a projection of the youth Simon wants to live, the youth he might have lived if he were only allowed a little more time to grow up. The strongest impulse behind the film is a nostalgia for lost innocence, a lament for a less urgent time when young people still had the leisure to spin dreams in which they might play the romantic hero.

Only at the film’s climax—the elaborate, nightmarish sequence of the police bust—are these feelings clearly focused for us; there is a delicate sense of self-irony throughout many of the early sections of the film, but the climax turns a grotesque distorting mirror on the romantic images, makes us reexamine all that had come before from a shocking new perspective. In this vision of the forces of the state turning their weapons against the children of their society, Simon is finally compelled to confront reality firsthand, denied the protection of fantasy. Revolution is no longer part of the game of growing up absurd; Simon has no more time to play or to dream. He is, at last, deeply involved and totally committed.

With this terrifying conclusion, *The Strawberry Statement* unquestionably presents a serious political statement about the inhumanity

of our society and the radicalization of a boy scourged and purified by the horror of police brutality. But what makes the film so moving is its genuine affection for the boyhood dreams that the camera lingers over in the early sections. The movie is ironic about Simon’s fantasies of romance and revolution, but it is also deeply attracted to his exuberant, playful, uncommitted vision of the world. In the last analysis, the film reminds us of the staggering sacrifice our age demands; we cannot help but mourn Simon’s freewheeling imagination, a youthful spirit of abandon that can never be reclaimed. Perhaps the doubts and ambiguities of the film prevent it from being effective as a revolutionary document; but I would put it another way—*The Strawberry Statement* is remarkable because it transcends its “message” to make us *feel* the anguish that accompanies radical political commitment in our world. Yeats’s great poem about the Irish rebellion of Easter 1916 sums up the transformation of ordinary men into revolutionaries—“All changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born”—showing his awareness of the human costs of a cause he believed in. “A terrible beauty is born”: the words would be an appropriate way of describing our feelings at the end of *The Strawberry Statement* too. Dotson Rader, that veteran of the Columbia Liberation, calls the film’s attention to the complexities of human feeling “counterrevolutionary.” And in a way, he may be right. But it seems the reason many of us regularly turn from politics back to art is that we are still searching for an illumination of the imaginative and emotional truths that any movement necessarily ignores. If the wave of campus rebellion movies has clarified this one crucial matter for film-makers and audiences, it will have served, in the long run, a useful purpose.